



HEXHAM TOWN COUNCIL
COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT POLICY

1. Introduction

This document sets out the role of community engagement and its importance, how the Council engages the wider community and identifies its needs and aspirations, and how the Council can improve community engagement.

The objectives of the policy are to:

- Encourage effective local community engagement.
- Ensure that throughout the Council there is clear understanding of the need to engage with communities about decisions that affect them.
- Enable aspirations/comments/suggestions obtained from community engagement to have an impact on decision making and the way services are delivered.
- Identify how the Council can enhance its profile by improving engagement with the wider community (with specific reference to hard-to-reach groups).

This policy should be considered together with the Council's Social Media Policy.

2. Community Engagement – An Overview

Community engagement is concerned with giving local people a voice and involving them in decisions which affect them and their community. This may include individuals, voluntary and community organisations as well as other public sector bodies.

It provides opportunities for local people to talk to the Council about their aspirations and/or needs in the community and neighbourhood. It allows the Council to consult with and inform people about the services provided, how it determines its priorities, how policies are determined and how well it is performing.

The term “stakeholder” refers to a wide range of people and groups that could include residents, visitors, businesses, voluntary organisations and others who have an interest in the Council.

Hard to reach groups refers to those who experience social exclusion and are

sometimes perceived as being disempowered. Some examples include young people, elderly people, people with physical disabilities, those for whom English is not their first language, low-income households, those who experience cultural differences or challenging social expectations, black and minority ethnic residents and members of the LGBT+ community. The Town Council does and will put effort into seeking their views but also recognises they sometimes exclude themselves through personal choice.

The key aspects of community engagement include:

- Development of a network of relationships between the Council, individuals, voluntary and community groups.
- Clear and open communication to ensure that information is made accessible to all groups.
- Listening and understanding from a range of people to identify aspirations, needs and problems of local people and groups.

Effective and meaningful community engagement can provide several benefits:

- The problems and needs of local people are clearly identified in order that appropriate new or improved facilities/services can be provided.
- Those participating feel empowered by being involved in decision making in their local community.
- This may result in enhanced leadership and greater interest in elections and standing for Council.

3. Hexham Town Council and Community Engagement

The Town Council will facilitate community engagement in the following ways:

- Make information available on what decisions are being considered and how residents can influence or contribute to the discussions. Methods used to ensure engagement will include the Town Council website, Town Council noticeboard, Community noticeboard, the Town Council and Hexham Community Partnership newsletter, Tyne Valley Express, Councillors attending the Farmers Market, press releases to the Hexham Courant, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, reports, emails (where permission is given), collaboration with key partners and face to face communication.
- All meetings of the Town Council and its Committees are open to the press and public and the first item on Full Council meeting agendas is to hear questions from Hexham residents regarding matters on the agenda or relating to Hexham, in line with the Council's Standing Orders. Residents can access agendas for meetings via the Town Council website and noticeboard. Copies of the agenda are also made available at the meetings.
- Facilities also exist where residents can, where appropriate or necessary, make

written or verbal reports or present petitions to Councillors.

- Planning applications are considered at Planning and Infrastructure Committee meetings usually held every three weeks. The opportunities for people to submit a written representation or speak applies equally at these meetings and equal opportunity is given to applicants, supporters, objectors and local community groups.
- The Town Clerk's office is required to play a neutral role so that residents can be fully involved and be confident that they are receiving unbiased information and support. This neutral involvement will allow more flexibility in the service and the personal element of the contact will hopefully encourage more involvement from the hard-to-reach members of the community.
- Details of how to contact the Town Clerk's office is displayed on the noticeboard, Town Council website, Facebook and Twitter. Details of how to contact Councillors is also displayed on the noticeboard and Town Council website.
- A list of Full Council meeting dates, and those of upcoming Committee meetings, including the start times and agendas when issued can be found on the Town Council website.
- The Town Council will be open and accountable in its dealing with residents and the community. It makes information on its policies and procedures freely available.
- The Town Council will be receptive to requests from residents or communities and will attempt to be flexible in order to ensure their opinions are known not only to the Town Council but also to other organisations. This may be by including an item for discussion on an agenda or allowing a local group to put its opinions into an official report undertaken by the Town Council.
- The Town Council will, where appropriate, operate a gateway service from its office to ensure local people and communities are referred to the correct organisation, officer or Town Councillor where the Town Council cannot resolve their issue directly and make sure the public are aware of the ways that they can use the relevant systems to make their views known.
- Town Councillors will continue to represent the Council on various outside bodies, to ensure that they are kept informed of the community's needs.
- The Town Council will continue to invite a wide variety of speakers to Full Council meetings, to engage the local community.
- The Town Council will continue to arrange free to attend annual events such as the Remembrance Day parade, Christmas lights switch-on and Bandstand sessions, as well as some one-off events.

4. Communication

Hexham Town Council is committed to improving community engagement by:

- Continuing all the above activities and services and improving relationships with

community groups, including developing measures to harness the views and opinions of people and groups who are often missed out of community engagement activities.

- Being proactive and willing to consider any reasonable opportunities that support its purpose of making information available and increasing contributions from the community, especially those difficult to reach.
- Considering the holding of a public meeting when dealing with controversial issues that affect the community.
- Consider holding consultations and surveys when necessary and appropriate and make results available.
- Continuing to work in partnership to review community led policies such as the Hexham Neighbourhood Plan. It will also ensure that priorities from such policies including aspirations are built into its own Action Plan.
- Identifying and embracing opportunities to work with other local community groups when the need arises.
- Publicising the positive results that have been achieved from working relationships between the Town Council and other community groups in order to encourage new relationships and partnerships and to raise community spirit.
- Promoting elections, the importance of the democratic process and the value of being a Councillor.
- Promoting the value to the town of volunteering.

5. Freedom of Information

In accordance with the Freedom of Information Act 2000, this policy will be posted on the Council website and copies will be available from the Town Council office.

6. Outcomes

The outcomes the Council is striving for and against which the success of this policy will be measured are:

- Improved communication through the establishment of new channels of engagement.
- More residents understanding the role of Town Councillors.
- Improved engagement with local communities, with more people feeling that they are involved in decision-making and a higher percentage of people involved in volunteering.
- Improved satisfaction with services provided by the Council, evaluated in a number of ways, including feedback surveys.

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